CHAPTER

8

Organizing Speeches and Debates by Local Candidates or Stand-ins for Candidates

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OBJECTIVES

Organizing speeches and debates will help students and community members to:

1. increase knowledge of the issues facing America.[1]
2. understand the historical significance of these issues.[2]
3. debate the strengths and weaknesses of the programs offered as solutions to America's problems and the politicians who support them.
4. enhance spontaneous and logical thought processes.
5. express ideas clearly and effectively.
6. apply academic knowledge to life situations.
7. work toward a common goal with peers, school faculty, parents, and the community.
8. learn how to contact public officials.[3]

Debates are the best device we have to inform and involve voters in the political process. Democracy, freedom, and free elections are breaking out across the globe."

—*Inside Debates: A Practical Guide*

1. Regardless of the issues you may choose for debates, the new National Standards for Civics and Government are applicable. For example, the new standards explicitly state that students must have an understanding of the fundamental ideas of American democracy before they can evaluate their responsibilities and the responsibilities that face our nation and its political leaders. See the new standards, Section II.

2. By understanding the historical events that contributed to today's political environment, students are better prepared to discuss the formation and potential success of new policies. For example, by studying the Bill of Rights and the inherent conflict of some individual rights, as stated in the new standards, students are better prepared to discuss contemporary issues related to personal rights. See the new standards, Section V.

3. The new standards also suggest that students learn how to identify and contact public officials by the fourth grade. See the new standards, Section III.

METHODS

"In whatever form, debates from the presidential to the local level have become the watershed events of American political campaigns. So if you're going to put one on, it's important to think ahead."[4]

In preparing debates and/or speeches for students and parents, keep the following in mind:

1. Choose a format.
2. Obtain necessary resources.
3. Select participants.
4. Plan ahead.
5. Contact public officials.
6. Choose a site.
7. Invite the audience.
8. Schedule the program.
9. Involve the media.
10. Follow up.

"Please keep in mind that the steps outlined here can also apply to debates that do not feature candidates. Use them to plan debates on public issues or debates for students. The debate format can be adapted to almost any academic subject, and can teach students valuable communications skills."[5]

1. Choose a format.

A. TYPES OF EVENTS

A variety of event types, from the simple to the complex, can be used in conducting a student debate or series of speeches. Students can:

- ★ role-play the candidates and give speeches or debate in their names, answering questions posed by a panel of community members and/or parents.
- ★ debate with the candidates who are actually running for local elections, with questions posed by a panel of students and adults.
- ★ role-play candidates giving campaign speeches while an audience of real candidates listens.
- ★ form a panel and ask questions of the actual candidates and let the candidates make campaign speeches or debate each other.
- ★ debate their peers in a classroom setting.
- ★ develop student/parent debate teams to compete against each other.
- ★ debate each other before younger students to help younger students make educated, informed choices (this has become a tradition in Beloit, Wisconsin).

Another option is a Saturday Teen Summit in which several speakers are invited to address a variety of issues. Students attend the event just as they would a conference. They sign in, listen to speeches, attend question-and-answer sessions, and then break for lunch at the school where students can mingle informally with the guest speakers. Participants convene in the afternoon to review and draw resolutions for action. Consider an opening session with a keynote speaker and provide students with name tags and a program so they can attend the sessions that most interest them. Student Council members might act as facilitators, introducing the speakers and taking notes.

B. DEVELOPING FORMATS

The basic type of event you choose may vary, but the questions below will help determine the format of your event no matter which type you choose.

Today's debates come in many sizes and shapes. Even if they don't fit the traditional definition, various formats can show the candidates' grasp of the issues and their ability to think on their feet. And they offer a distinct alternative to the 30second television commercials that characterize many campaigns.

4. "Inside Debates: A Practical Guide" by the Commission on Presidential Debates, page 1.

5. "Inside Debates: A Practical Guide" by the Commission on Presidential Debates, page 1.

Some of the major format questions include:

- ★ **Panel/moderator selection.** If the format you agree upon calls for a moderator and/or panelists, one good way to choose them is for each candidate and the debate sponsor to draw up a list of acceptable names, maybe six for each position. Then you, as the sponsor, could pare the names down to a common list. For panel members and moderator, you might consider journalists rather than people from special interest groups. Journalists are likely to be more objective and more experienced in asking questions in a broadcast setting. But above all, choose a moderator and panelists who have your and the candidates' trust.
- ★ **Topic.** What's the debate going to be about? It can be wide-ranging or confined to just a few issues—education and the economy, for example. If a series of debates is to be held, each one might cover a select group of topics.
- ★ **Length.** How long should the debate be? That will depend on a variety of factors, including whether or not it will be broadcast, the number of participants, and how many debates there will be. We think 90 minutes is just about right in most cases.
- ★ **Opening and closing statements.** Do you want the candidates to have opening and closing statements? They can provide a framework for the debate, and most candidates prefer them. But keep them brief. Consider three minutes for opening and two for closing—that's plenty.
- ★ **Questions and answers.** It's a good idea to set limits for both questions and answers. Panelists in the commission's debates were given 45 seconds for each question. Two minutes for answers, and two for responses by the other candidate, should give each contender enough time to make his or her points and for a broad range of questions to be asked. These time limits can be adjusted if you have multiple candidates. Remember that the length of questions and answers will determine how many questions get asked during the entire debate.
- ★ **Timing.** Timing and control of the opening statements, answers, and responses is critically important, especially in a broadcast debate. It is not a job to be assigned to the moderator—he or she has plenty of other things to worry about. The timer must be a responsible person who is acceptable to all parties. Remember that mistakes in timing can lead to claims of unfairness, the last thing a sponsor needs after the debate. You should also decide how to let the candidates know how much time they still have and when their time is up. Make sure that whatever device you use, either visual or audio, is clear to the candidates.
- ★ Order of speaking: Who gets to speak first and who finishes up? Sporting events have long since dealt with that question and offer a good solution. In the 1988 presidential debates, George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis agreed to a simple coin toss—the easiest and quickest way to settle the matter. Have more than two candidates? Draw straws or choose another easy selection process. Don't agonize over how to get all the candidates together for this decision. They can send representatives, or it could be done by phone if everyone trusts you.[6]

6. "Inside Debates: A Practical Guide," by the Commission on Presidential Debates.

2. Obtain necessary resources.

A partial checklist of budget items would include the following:

- ★ **Debate hall.** Can you use a hall that will be provided free of charge, or will it have to be rented?
- ★ **Furniture.** Do you need to provide a raised platform for the speakers, lecterns, chairs for the audience?
- ★ **Electrical.** Will you need microphones? Additional lights? Additional power sources?
- ★ **Printed materials.** Will you need to print programs, posters, media credentials, or audience tickets? These will not only be helpful in promoting the debate, but will serve as memorable souvenirs afterward.
- ★ **Labor.** It may require professional help to put up and take down some equipment, particularly specialized broadcasting or electrical items. For most things, volunteers can provide invaluable help at no cost. Make sure extra hands are on deck if needed. Remember, you'll need to clean up afterward.
- ★ **Security.** Will you need to provide security if you're using a facility after its normal business hours?
- ★ **Cassettes/transcripts.** If you plan on recording the debate, and offering video cassettes, audio cassettes, or written transcripts, make sure they're figured in ahead of time. You have the option, of course, of charging users for tapes or transcripts in order to cover the cost of producing them.

This list isn't exhaustive, but it will give you a head start. As you'll see, many of these needs can be filled by obtaining facilities and services free of charge, but make sure you get clear agreements ahead of time.[7]

3. Select participants.

Now, who will participate? As a starting point, in a political debate you may want to include everyone (or stand-ins for everyone) whose name is on the ballot. To some extent, this decision depends on what kind of debate you're hosting. If you're planning a primary debate, you may want to first invite the contenders from one party, then hold a second debate for candidates of the other. The question of fringe candidates is a tough one and best decided on a case-by-case basis. Remember your goal: to get the voters the best information on candidates and issues.

In an issues debate, you could invite representatives from two or more organizations with competing views on the topic to be discussed. Or you could form debate teams—representatives from organizations with one position on an issue can square off against a team from organizations with the opposite position.

Student debates can be structured with students as candidate "stand-ins," or they can focus on topics of community interest. Consider a student debate on a matter involving local education, for instance, or on a proposition or referendum which may be on the ballot.[8]

At Huntsville High School, the Student Council handles the "nuts and bolts" of the debate. They find adult representatives to form the panel that addresses the "candidates." Teachers, the Mayor, the Superintendent, university professors, ministers, parents and business leaders all serve in this capacity. Panel members are given the same study materials as the candidates and develop their questions strictly on their own. Student "candidates" are not given the questions in advance, although they are encouraged to draft and place "study guides" on their podiums for reference, if needed.

7. "Inside Debates: A Practical Guide," by the Commission on Presidential Debates, pages 2 and 3.

8. "Inside Debates: A Practical Guide" by the Commission on Presidential Debates, page 4.

4. Plan ahead.

At Huntsville High School, a combined debate, rally, and straw election engages approximately 500 students, local politicians, staff, and parents each year. The event is sponsored by the English and History Departments and the Student Council. During the month preceding the event, both departments teach lessons about election issues, political parties, and candidates. Historical overview and appropriate literary pieces are integral parts of each lesson as are the contemporary events and issues themselves. Knowledgeable speakers (such as college or university professors, insurance agents, and lawyers) are invited to classrooms to provide added insight into specific areas such as economics, religion (Christian, Jewish, Moslem), health insurance, and geriatrics. Novels and short stories are supplemented with the writings of authors such as Jonathan Swift, Richard Wright, and Winston Churchill, as well as with presidential speeches and editorials found in national newspapers, periodicals, and local papers.

An active publicity campaign encourages students willing to act as student representatives of the presidential and gubernatorial candidates to apply. Those selected through a personal interview work closely with a mentor as they prepare to argue the positions of the candidate they will represent. Information on party platforms and candidate positions is gathered from sources such as newspaper and magazine articles, campaign offices, TV interviews, and the Internet. (Students researching issues and candidates can find helpful information on the Mock Election Internet page located at www.nationalmockelection.org.) Students are encouraged to register to be members of state delegations, and students are divided according to the same percentage basis as the electoral college. Following the debate, they cast their votes by state to elect the winners.

5. Contact public officials.

If you plan to involve real candidates, be sure to invite them well ahead of the event. Organize a student lesson on writing letters to elected officials and candidates and encourage students to draft letters/invitations to public officials or candidates. Make sure students correctly address public officials. For example, a senator is addressed in the salutation as *Dear Senator Smith* and a representative is addressed as *Dear Congressman* or *Congresswoman Jones.* Also note that in the address of the public official (on the outside of the envelope as well as above the letter salutation) the title "Honorable" appears before the name of a Senator or Representative.

In letters to public officials or candidates, highlight the educational and nonpartisan aspects of the mock election and tell each candidate specifically why he or she should attend the event (civic duty, to get the word out, to campaign, to support voter education projects and/or the community). Be sure to let a candidate know if his or her opponent(s) plan to participate. Students should follow up their letters with phone calls to the scheduling coordinators of the respective public officials and candidates.

Next, you and the candidates have to negotiate the details of the debate. In order to make progress on dozens of daily decisions, ask each candidate to name a representative who has the power to speak for him or her. Find out how to contact those representatives quickly, including when they're on the campaign trail.

In handling negotiations, be firm and be fair. Different candidates have different agendas. The role of the sponsor is particularly important in getting the candidates to agree on a whole range of debate issues. And remember, debates don't always happen.

What do you need to negotiate? Each of the following format issues will be discussed in the next section, but to give you a partial list:

- ★ selection of a panel of questioners and moderator
- ★ debate topics
- ★ debate length
- ★ length of opening and closing statements
- ★ timing the debate and selecting a timer
- ★ order of speakers

Generally speaking, once decisions have been made on these and other issues, it's a good idea to put them in writing so everyone has the same understanding of the debate's ground rules.[9]

Public speakers are also sometimes available from the Department of Defense, NASA, or the Social Security Administration. Representatives of these departments will speak to organized groups free of charge as long as they are given several weeks advance notice.

6. Choose a site.

Where are you going to hold the debate? If it's going to be on television or radio, you could hold it in a production studio. That takes care of a lot of logistical problems, but it will limit the size of the audience. The alternative is suitable space in a civic auditorium, theater, school, or hotel.

Here's a list of some of the factors to consider when selecting a site:

- ★ **Broadcasting.** If you're going to televise the debate, get a TV expert to help you find a hall that's well suited to the technical equipment that will be needed. That could be someone from a local station or a freelance producer. Get his or her input on your options before you make a final decision. It will save you a lot of headaches and expense later.
- ★ **Audience.** Remember that a stage for the candidates, broadcasting equipment, and room for journalists will take up significant space. In the Commission's first 1988 debate, the useable space was reduced by 25% after all the cameras were put in place. Figure out how much room you want for audience seats before you select the site.
- ★ **Traffic.** If possible, choose a site where your debate isn't going to encounter unnecessary problems because of rush-hour traffic or other tie-ups. The local police department is the best source to advise you here.
- ★ **Neutrality.** Pick a place that's neutral. Also, make sure that it's easily accessible to the candidates, public, and the press.[10]

Huntsville High School uses its school auditorium, because a maximum capacity of 500 helps keep the event manageable. The Student Council decorates the auditorium, provides local coverage, and schedules special "guest" appearances such as George and Martha Washington, the Statue of Liberty, Uncle Sam, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Costumes are both made and rented. Arrangements are also made for an introductory speaker, the school choir, and representatives of the band. Many times the Pledge of Allegiance is led by a grade-school student.

9. "Inside Debates: A Practical Guide," by the Commission on Presidential Debates, page 6.

10. "Inside Debates: A Practical Guide," by the Commission on Presidential Debates, page 5.

7. Invite the audience.

If you're going to use a public hall, who attends the debate is important. It's natural for each side to try to pack the hall with supporters, so guard against that by establishing a ticket policy early. One solution is to allot an equal number of tickets to each candidate and to strictly enforce the rules of conduct during the debate. Remember that time taken up with audience reaction is time taken away from the candidates and their views.

Here are some specific considerations to keep in mind:

- ★ **Noise.** The nature of your debate hall can greatly affect how noisy things might get. Uncarpeted cement floors, for instance, will magnify every audience move from claps to sneezes. The larger the audience, the more you need to consider this.
- ★ **Community interest.** As soon as a debate is announced, everyone in town will want tickets. Decide on audience size and ticket distribution early and firmly. One way to involve people who can't be given tickets is to have them serve as ushers or ticket-takers.
- ★ **Cameras.** Make it clear to ticket holders whether they can bring cameras or other electronic equipment before they arrive. Flashbulbs can be distracting to candidates and to TV camera crews. Establish your policy on this ahead of time.
- ★ **Safety.** Make sure the size of the audience and the seating plan are consistent with safe use of the hall. Checking with the fire marshal early may save changing things at the last minute.[11]

8. Develop a program schedule.

Huntsville High School's debate format is structured after those used on televised debates. A student moderates the debate and a time keeper monitors both responses and rebuttals. At the close of the debate, each candidate is given an opportunity to summarize his/her position.

Following the debate, which lasts about 90 minutes, both parties are given approximately 10 minutes to rally. A student whip, selected in advance, leads his or her party's rally. Students march around the auditorium with campaign posters for state and national candidates. The jazz band plays the appropriate patriotic music, but a P.A. system would work just as well. Rallying allows participants to unwind, and also injects a great deal of color and renewed enthusiasm. Following the rally, delegates cast their votes and then a roll call of states is made. Just as at the national convention, the representing delegate pitches his or her respective state, district or territory before they cast their votes. This process is based on the electoral college.

Because Huntsville High School combines so many activities into one event, all participants are given a program containing biographical information on the real candidates, party platforms, and the electoral college. Extensive preparation beforehand creates well-informed and well thought out questions—even the real candidates were impressed!

This format, with the necessary modifications, can work well with local, state, and national elections. Everyone becomes an active participant and students, staff, parents, and community members make the political process come alive. Modifications can also be made to these activities for schoolwide student body elections. This allows election activities to occur every year, not just in the nation's election years.

11. "Inside Debates: A Practical Guide," by the Commission on Presidential Debates, page 10.

If you choose a simpler format, take the precautions necessary to ensure that the event adheres to the allotted time schedule. This might require that a time keeper strictly enforces responses and rebuttals. Also choose a moderator and spokesperson from each team to resolve issues that may arise over the course of the debate.

If you choose to organize a series of speeches given by students or candidates, the format of your program will be slightly different. You may want to have candidates, their role plays or stand-ins deliver typical campaign speeches or prepare answers to a predetermined list of questions. Whichever format you choose, be sure to leave time at the end of the program for a general question-and-answer session.

A program containing biographical and background information about each of the candidates will also be useful to those attending the event.

9. Involve the media.

Political debates are news events, and the news media have to figure in your planning. First, set up a system for giving credentials to the journalists who want to cover the debate. This allows you to identify and control the number of journalists who have access to the debate hall and other areas. It also allows you to fairly allocate space among the different news organizations who will want to send representatives.

Consider the needs of different types of media. Is the debate going to be televised? If so, every production detail is important. The height, shape, and size of the lecterns, for instance, can lead to more negotiations than a disarmament treaty. While candidates and their advisors need to be consulted on these matters, it's best to put all technical aspects of the debate into the hands of professionals. They can help you equip the hall for television, and decide where to place cameras, how to light the hall, whether power sources are sufficient, and how to position the candidates for good camera coverage. The technical problems which can arise from inadequate attention to detail are enormous. Recall the 20-minute silence during the 1976 Ford-Carter debate when all the sound went dead.

If a debate is to be simultaneously broadcast on radio, you will need to arrange for radio anchor positions which don't interfere with other aspects of the event. Are still photographers going to be in the hall? If so, you need to designate where, and make sure their equipment isn't distracting either because of noise or flash devices. Are you going to provide closed-captioning of the debate? Make the necessary arrangements ahead of time. Is the audience going to participate in questioning the candidates? Place standing microphones in the aisles for questioners to use.

Once the debate is over, many journalists will want to question the candidates and their advisors. Make sure you've identified an area where this exchange can take place. Post-debate commentary can be lengthy. Try to stage it in a location where it doesn't interfere with the process of cleaning up the hall and putting things back in order.[12] (See Chapter 4 of this guide for more information on this topic.)

10. Follow up.

Once the debate is over, the sponsor's tasks are thankfully fairly simple. Make sure the hall is restored to normal, and that equipment which was borrowed or rented is returned. If you have decided to produce transcripts or tapes of the debate, you will be providing journalists with a valuable tool for post-debate coverage. The sooner you can transcribe the debate and distribute copies, the more useful they will be.[13]

Back in the classroom, analyze what was said. What were the three main messages of each candidate? How do they differ from the three main messages of other candidates? To whom was the candidate trying to appeal? Why? What tactics and/or mechanisms were used? Encourage students to remain informed about the candidates and issues. Consider holding weekly meetings to follow the course of the campaign and address candidate fluctuations or flip-flops on the issues. Be sure to thank everyone who contributed to the event as well as special guests who attended the event.

12. "Inside Debates: A Practical Guide," by the Commission on Presidential Debates, pages 11–12.

13. "Inside Debates: A Practical Guide," by the Commission on Presidential Debates, page 12.